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City Speak

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“History, greed have blocked north-south rail link in Boston.”

After years of feuding with the state, Hingham selectmen finally agreed last week to support a commuter rail line through their town, including a tunnel under Hingham Center. Too bad the same couldn't be done in Boston.

Thanks to improvements on Amtrak, it may soon be possible to travel by rail from Boston to Providence faster than you can get from one side of Boston to the other. An underground rail connection between North Station and South Station would solve the problem, but funding for such a project has never been forthcoming.

Aside from public officials, what do we blame for this continuing silliness? How about geography, corporate greed, and history.

Boston's greatest natural advantage is the harbor. It's deep, well protected, and close to major shipping lanes. From the earliest days of settlement, the harbor has been this town's biggest asset.

Yet, if nature was dink in giving us a wonderful harbor, she played a cruel joke by not giving us access to the interior. None of the three rivers flowing into the harbor basin, Neponset, Mystic, or Charles, is navigable for more than a few miles. Our chief commercial rival, New York City, had the advantage of the Hudson to tap her interior, and after 1825, the Erie Canal gave the city a water link to the Midwest. Boston languished.

In the 1830's, hopes soared in Boston with the arrival of the railroad. Steam power and iron rails. According to local boosters, would connect our port to America's burgeoning west.

Again, nature doomed us. This time, it was the Berkshires. Laying track and climbing over steep grades was simply too expensive to compete with the more economical routes running from New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Once more, Boston was left behind.

Although our western rail connections remained quite limited, in the years before the Civil War, dozens of small railroads were built crisscrossing New England. Boston interests concentrated on building roads north to Portland, Maine, Concord, N.H., and Vermont. At the same time, New York investors made their way up the coast and took control of the rail lines in southern New England.

Lines from the south dead-ended at terminals on the south side of Boston.

Lines from the north ended on the northern edge of the city. There was no direct cross-city rail connection between terminals.

In 1868, faced with the increasingly difficult problem of moving freight across the city, Atlantic Avenue was opened. Huge horse-drawn wagons lumbered up and down the avenue moving freight between rail terminals. Even that proved inadequate, though, and in 1872, tracks were laid down the middle of the street and the Union Freight railroad was incorporated to carry freight between terminals. The line proved highly successful, and in 1876, it became part of the Old Colony Line.

Nineteenth-century railroad competition was fierce and ruthless, and no one was more cunning and successful than J.P. Morgan, the force behind the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad. Morgan and his henchmen preferred monopoly to competition. Whenever possible, they either bankrupted or bought out their competitors. If that were not possible, they negotiated agreements to divide up markets. Having devoured all the roads between New York and Boston, Morgan laid covetous eyes on the northern routes controlled by the Boston and Maine. In 1893, he got control of the Old Colony. It looked as if New York was about to overwhelm Boston.

To save themselves from a hostile takeover, the Boston and Maine negotiated a treaty with the Morgan interests. They divided New England along the route of the Boston and Albany, the present Framingham commuter line. Morgan and his interests agreed to stay on the south side of the line and the Boston and Maine people promised to stay north of it. Having divided their territory, neither side had any special interest in securing better direct north-south links, since any connection might only invite more competition.

Freight moving north and south either had to be switched at Concord or Framingham or moved by the Union Freight along Atlantic Avenue. Neither was very satisfactory. The Union Freight line, for example, was permitted to operate only between midnight and 5 a.m., lest the trains interfere with wagon traffic or scare the horses, and trains were held to a speed limit of 4 miles per hour. The line made its last run on March 4, 1970, leaving the city without any north-south rail link.

Thus, 30 years ago, Boston lost its last, if inadequate, north-south rail link. For too long, this city and region have suffered from the lack of a north-south rail connection. Where the old Boston and Albany line once marked the division between the north and south, we now have the Massachusetts Turnpike running parallel to the former Boston and Albany right of way. It is our Mason Dixon Transportation Line.

Despite ongoing problems with the Big Dig, we ought not be discouraged from undertaking bold and imaginative programs. We filled in the Back Bay. We will depress the Central Artery. We ought to build a north-south rail line.